

Spring 2013

Interview of Frederick Van Fleteren, Ph.D.

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Field Notes

Interviewee: Frederick Van Fleteren

Interviewer: Leo Wong

Interview Date: March 19, 2013

Interview Location: Dr. Van Fleteren's office in Wister Hall at LaSalle University, 1900 West Olney Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19144

The Interviewee:

Frederick Van Fleteren was born in St. Clair Shores, Michigan on July 14, 1941. He was raised by two devout Catholic parents who valued his education. He went to Catholic grade schools and colleges in the United States, as well as two Irish Universities when he was getting his PhD. in philosophy. His interest in philosophy would guide his academic and professional career from his undergraduate years to the present day where he is a Philosophy professor at LaSalle University. From 1967 until 1978, he was an ordained priest with the Augustinians. He received his B.A. and M.A. from Villanova in 1964 and 1968 respectively, and his PhD in ancient philosophy with a specialty in St. Augustine from the National University of Ireland and University College, Dublin in 1971. After leaving the priesthood in 1978, he worked as an assistant administrator at Crozer-Chester Medical Center at Crozer Pennsylvania in 1978, an executive director of the hospice program at Lourdes Hospital in Bingham New York from 1979 until 1981, and director of a hospice at Quakertown Pennsylvania from 1989 until 1995. He has been a professor at LaSalle University since 1987, and has edited and published numerous academic articles and books since the 1970s.

The Interviewer:

I, Leo Wong (b. 1989 in Lakewood, NJ), grew up in Toms River, NJ, earned a B.A. in History at Saint Joseph's University in 2011. I am currently a student in the Public History track of the Graduate History Program at LaSalle University.

Background:

In the class Oral History, taught by Dr. Barbara Allen, the main project of the class is an interview with either a longtime staff member of LaSalle or an alumni. After my interview with Dr. John Lukacs, I emailed Dr. Allen to inform her that my interview was only an hour. This was only half of the minimum length that was required for the recording. I asked her if I could conduct another interview to make up for the shortness of the first one, to which she responded with an affirmative. She and Dr. John Rossi suggested that I select Dr. Frederick Van Fleteren of the Philosophy Department for the interviewee of the project.

I first contacted Dr. Van Fleteren by email on March 18th asking for his permission to be interviewed. On the next day, he responded by saying that he agreed. From the 19th to the 21st of March, we exchanged emails detailing the time and location of the interview, as well as what topics would be covered. I explained to him that it would be an hour long interview with roughly thirty minutes dealing with his time at LaSalle. When asked about the location of the interview, it was decided that his office would be sufficient.

Preparing for the interview was more difficult compared to the previous one with Dr. Lukacs. When I contacted the university archivist Br. Joseph Grabenstein about finding information on him, he told me that there was little information on him available and that I should check LaSalle's online Digital Commons. Unfortunately, there was little information on him on both the internet as well as the digital archives. What little I was able to find consisted of book reviews of works on theology.

Despite those difficulties, I took steps to ensure that I would not have the same problems that I encountered from the previous interview. For example, I scheduled the interview almost a month after getting permission from him in order to have more time for research and creating adequate questions. In addition, I sent both Dr. Allen and Dr. Van Fleteren copies of my questions ahead of time so that they could tell me which questions were adequate or not, and what questions could be added. Dr. Van Fleteren and I settled on having the interview on Friday March 15th at 2 p.m.

Description of the Interview:

On March 15th, I arrived at LaSalle before 2 p.m. after work. Upon arriving at Dr. Van Fleteren's office in the Philosophy Department at Wister Hall, I discovered that he was not present. Thinking that he was momentarily away from his office, I waited for about twenty minutes before asking a staff member about his location. When he told me that he had left early for the day, I went to the library to send him an email asking if he had forgotten our interview. In addition to that, I left a message on his office phone also leaving my number for him to reach me. He called the following morning apologizing for forgetting about the interview and explaining that he had left for a sports event. We decided to reschedule the interview on March 19th around noon instead.

On the 19th, I arrived at his office before noon. Although he was on the phone, he invited me in to have a seat. I did not wait long before he ended his call and greeted me and apologized for what happened on the 15th. Just as he did in our first email messages, he also commented on how his office was messy. When I looked around, there were lots of documents and books on his desk, as well as books on St. Augustine, St. Anselm, and other sizeable works lining two large book shelves. Before I began the interview, I told him about the release forms and he agreed and signed them. I also tested out the recorder to ensure that it would pick up his voice. I placed it on his desk between us.

The interview itself went much better than the one with Dr. Lukacs. Despite the fact that philosophy and theology were not subjects I had expertise in, I felt more at ease when talking with Dr. Van Fleteren. There were no questions that he refused to answer and I did not need to spend as much time during the interview to assess whether I could ask certain questions or not. He even made a few humorous comments during the interview. I felt that showing my questions to Dr. Allen to see if they were appropriate also helped. The interview was largely chronological with respect to the events that were covered. In addition, there were no interruptions during the interview. What I might consider to be a weakness is when I omitted some questions because I thought that he already covered them when he answered questions that dealt with similar topics. There were instances when I was replaying the interview when I could not fully understand what he was saying until a few replays. Also, details such as church bells that were clearly audible at certain points during the interview, as well as my constant interjections of “uh-huh” and “yes” could be considered weaknesses.

Note on Recording:

I recorded the interview with an Olympus VN-702PC digital voice recorder on battery power. No external microphone was required for the recording. When I got home right after the interview, I connected the recorder to my laptop via USB cable and uploaded the recording as an mp3 file. I then downloaded it onto a flash drive.